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AUTHOR Zillo, Frank
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ABSTRACT

This general review of the development and demise in popularity of the "audiolingual" method of teaching second languages in America underscores the impact of World War II on the changing needs of the country's manpower resources in the field of international relations. The author develops the thesis that the urgent need for speakers of second languages during the last three decades in America gave rise to the "audiolingual method" of instruction. The current international status of English has obviated the rationale for massive federal support and for the audiolingual method of language instruction. (RL)

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THE BIRTH AND DEATH OF THE AUDIO-LINGUAL METHOD

by

Frank Zillo

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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CONTENTS

Introduction.....1

PART I---FROM ITS BIRTH TO ITS GROWTH.....1-7

PART II---ITS DEATH AND THE HERE AFTER.....8-11

Footnotes.....12-13

Bibliography.....14-15

Introduction

Ties among nations, whether commercial or diplomatic, have obviously been increased during the past few years. Ties ever more binding will likely be seen in 1973 and in the rest of the seventies. Commerce, international broadcasting programs, and newly opened diplomatic channels have led to great emphasis on being able to convey ideas in other languages. All this led to the neologism, "audio-lingual".[1] The Audio-lingual Method strives at developing listening and speaking skills first as the basis for establishing the reading and writing skills. Nelson Brooks stated that, "Language is primarily what is said and only secondary what is written."[2]

I

From its Birth to its Growth

The World War II era made many officials face the startling reality of how much the study of modern languages had been put aside. How could the United States establish communication with the allies or even the enemy with such a serious shortage of interpreters.

The government set up a kind of crash program employing top educators and lingusts in an almost regimentary enviorment. Given top priorities were the goals of instilling near native accents and the enablement of the new interpreter to understand a native speaker. The linguists and experts explained the structures aided by:natives, small classes and endless hours of drilling and practicing. In order to assure highest results, the "cream of the crop" of the armed forces had been picked to participate in the program. All the new tecniques and research that was put to use appeared to be producing remarkable results i.e., the men mastered the language in an approximately a 36 week program.

When the war ended many teachers and educators became interested in the audio-lingual developmnts. Teaching materials for high school and college levels were being mass produced for the commonly taught languages.[3] Teaching aids such as tape recordings and language labs were developed at this time. Although they were found useful in employing the new methods, Audio-visual is not Audio-lingual.

To clearify matters, Robert Lado defines and explains:

> " Audio-lingual and Audio-visual are different terms. Audio-lingual refers to listening and speaking, the two central skills in learning a language, while Audio-visual refers only to one of these skills, the more passive one of listening." [4]

Before the war, language teachers of the old tradition guaranteed nothing to their students. Language learning was not encouraged as something pleasurable. Structural fifficulties coupled with the burdensome exceptions and vocabulary were stressed. The student was led to believe that the road to properly learning a language entailed an excrutiating process, that would lead him "perhaps" to enough knowledge to acquire the skill of reading and an "enjoyment of the language."

During the war years and after, teachers began formulating attitudes toward the new method. They believed that by using the Audio-lingual Method(a

process of child-like learning) with its repetitions, imitations, plenty of time, and above all "special "mysterious tecniques of great magical aura"that were never explicitly stated, one could surprisingly enough achieve native fluency in a short span. Teachers became bombarded with the new method and its linguistic research and they needed to apply all this to preparing teaching aids and tecnique. William Moulton compiled "slogans" to aid in this very problem. He lists them[5] as follows:

1) Language is speech, not writing.
2) A language is a set of habits.
3) Teach the language not about the language.
4) A language is what its native speaker says not what someone thinks they ought to say.
5) Languages are different.

We ask ourselves, Why did the traditionalists not stress the oral part of the language? The new breed believed that the problems in teaching oral skills could be erased because oral skills are now more important and desirable. Perhaps the oral approach was nver considered too much, reason being, the classes were fairly large[6] and there would not be enough time.

What skill could be accomplished if each student spoke for two minutes or less in an hour class. Besides many believed the teachers could not speak that well, especially when it came to accents, phonetics and intonation and why bother, the student was never going to have the opportunity for language outside of school.

The new breed opptomists had the answers: make the class size smaller, increase class hours, use lay people as drill masters and natives as 'informants'. Native speakers handled the problem of accents, intonation and phonetics. They acted as judge and aid. He might not necessarily be competent in teaching his own language, but he certainly could comment on the spoken aspect. Teacher and aid were to be aided by records, movies, tapes and other audio-visual devices.

The Audio-lingual Method strives to teach the skills in the order of listening, speaking, reading and writing with emphasis on speaking in early years and literature in later years. Listening and speaking, even at advance levels, remain key and are given first consideration.

At the initial level of instruction, the learning cosists mostly of dialogues with expressions common to everyday language. The dialogues are learned by rote-memorization and imitation. When the students are completely familiar with the dialogue, they are introduced to pattern drills based on grammatical structures incorporated in previous dialogues. Drills are practiced by choral and individual response. The student is orientated in the language without texts or printed matter and is gradually introduced to the printed matter.When the student commences to write it is mostly imitative of dialogues or a composition made up of familiar vocabulary and structures. Latter he might be allowed to write variations of drill patterns.

Gustave Mathieu in commenting on the implications of the oral approach says that:

"Once we acknowledge that language is skill which can be mastered by practice, we have

also disposed of the old wives tale that only the gifted can learn and should be allowed to learn a foreign language. To be sure there will always be different rates at which learners will progress." [7]

II
Its Death and the Here After

By 1965, the Audio -lingual Method had gained a significant following but when the sixties decade closed so did audio-lingual enthusiasm. By then the method had been around long enough for srutiny and serios debate and although many rallied in its cause, there were now those who no longer considered the principles and ideas that founded the method to be valid.

The pioneer language educators of today have come up with new conclusions and theories.[8] They seem to think that:

1) Although a person can be aware of structure, it does not necessarily follow that a student of language will master the second language in a quick and secure manner.

2) Vocabulary appears to be more important for prompt and up and coming communication than structure.

Vocabulary is controlled in pattern drills because structure rules by analogy took first preference.

3) There are many common or similar features to both the first and second languages.(An example is that many words can be directly translated into quite a few languages. The words "bar"and" table" are two such words.) We are led to conclude that:

4) Straight forward memorization of dialogues appears to be unrewarding.

5) Communication is most important. The fact that an idea is being conveyed is much more inportant than the mistakes in grammar or structure.

6) A complete restriction of the native or primary language is foolhardy. Students do translate items into the native language whether we wish to believe it or not. Although the role of the native language is still not defined, what seems apparent how ever is that:[9]

a) Language is acquired through the senses.

b) Bilingualism is not a realistic goal for educators.

c) The learning process can be helped by using the native language.

We have seen that out of critical need for language study came the Audio-lingual Method. The Method was considerably sensationalized by the media, perhaps too much. The Method took nearly two decades to cool of. When the war ended it also should have ended because its primary function was completed. It obviously didn't and although it gained quick enthusiasm, this "quickness" was present at its death. The seventies were born and the Method died almost as quickly as the new decade was ushered in.

Let me conclude with the theme of Mario Pei's speech to a graduating class in 1972. He stated that:

"An international language is rapidly ceasing

to be a luxury that can be put off into the future; it is becoming an immediate necessity." [10]

Footnotes

Introduction

1 Nelson Brooks of Yale coined the word audio-lingual to describe the new method. There were various other terms used to describe it, i.e., oral-aural, aural-oral, audio-oral, direct, functional and natural.

2 See Nelson Brooks, Language and Language Learning-Theory and Practice (New York, 1960) p 20.

PART I

3 The commonly taught languages were Spanish, French and German.

4 See Robert Lado, Language Teaching: A Scientific Approach (New York,1964) .

5 Linguistics and Language Teaching in the United States 1940-1960," in C. Mohmann, A. Sommerfelt, and J. Whatmough, eds., Trends in European and American Linguistics, 1930-1960 (Utrecht: Spectrum Publishers, 1961), pp. 86-89.

6 An average class on the whole consisted of 30-40 students.

7. See Gustave Mathieu, "Exceptional Children." ERIC (January 1961): Volume 27. No.5.

PART II

8 See Philip D. Smith, "Toward a Practical Theory of Secondary Language Instruction." ERIC (November 13.1971).

9 Ibid.

10 See Mario Pei, "Need for International Language for All." Intellect (October,1972) p.10.

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